
ENVIRONMENTAL Fact Sheet



29 Hazen Drive, Concord, New Hampshire 03301 • (603) 271-3503 • www.des.nh.gov

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Watershed Districts and Ordinances

What are Watershed Districts and Ordinances?

Watershed district and ordinances are methods of zoning that recognize watershed boundaries instead of political boundaries, as a means of regulating land uses that may affect surface water quality. A watershed district or ordinance may set rules or regulations that restrict certain activities within the watershed in order to protect surface water resources, such as lakes, ponds and rivers. Regulations could include setback requirements, buffer requirements, land use restrictions, implementation of best management practices (BMP) and implementation of low impact development (LID) techniques. Typically, a watershed district or ordinance is proposed by a town or city planning board and must be approved by the voters. Often, the ordinance or district modifies or amends zoning regulations already in place in the towns or cities involved. Watershed districts and ordinances may vary by town and can be tailored to suit the needs of the particular watershed.

How Can Watershed Districts and Ordinances Protect New Hampshire Lakes and Ponds?

This approach to watershed management is beneficial to New Hampshire's surface waters, especially those with expansive watersheds. Within a watershed district or ordinance, towns work together to protect their common water resource(s). A watershed district or ordinance may decrease sedimentation, and nutrient loading to surface waters by taking measures to reduce or eliminate stormwater runoff. In addition, reduction or elimination of the use of hazardous materials within the watershed may prevent dangerous substances from reaching lakes and ponds. In densely developed watersheds, this approach may help to improve water quality. In relatively undeveloped watersheds, this approach may help to protect water quality in the face of future development.

How To Form a Watershed District or Ordinance in Your Community

Forming a watershed district or ordinance involves bringing a lot of different groups together under a shared goal. Often, DES will work with the interested communities and provide as much assistance as possible throughout the process. The first step is to determine which towns are included in the lake or pond's watershed. Town planning boards and conservation commissions should be included in the planning process. Watershed districts and ordinances formed to protect lakes and ponds often involve local lake associations as well. These groups, as well as any other interested groups or individuals, determine what activities will be regulated. Regulated activities may include agriculture, forestry and construction, as well as standards for septic systems. Standards for wetlands and surface water protection may be included as well. Regulations or standards are set for the watershed district or ordinance, and put to a vote within each town. Once the voters of each town in the watershed accept the regulations and standards, the ordinance or district may go into effect.

For more information, or examples of watershed districts or ordinances that have been implemented in New Hampshire, contact Jody Connor, DES Limnology Center Director, at (603) 271-3414 or jconnor@des.state.nh.us.